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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 000236

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, SEMEP, AND IPA; NSC FOR
SHAPIRO/KUMAR; JOINT STAFF FOR LTGEN SELVA

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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS DISCUSS
NEGOTIATIONS, JERUSALEM, AND SOCIOECONOMIC ISSUES WITH DAS
COFMAN WITTES

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary Tamara Cofman Wittes discussed efforts for Middle East peace, the growing distance between Palestinian and Israeli societies, and the role of women with Palestinian Authority (PA) officials and Palestinian civil society activists. Participants lamented decreased familiarity between Israelis and Palestinians as a result of the West Bank separation barrier. They also noted the increasing isolation of Arab-majority East Jerusalem, and the challenges faced by communities straddling Jerusalem's municipal borders and the separation barrier. Participants reported a lack of popular support among Palestinians for a return to the negotiating table with Israel. On a positive note, PA Minister of Women's Affairs Rahiba Diab noted the prominent role of women in Palestinian society compared to its Arab neighbors. End Summary.

KNOW THY NEIGHBOR, OR NOT

2. (C) At an informal January 28 discussion in Ramallah with visiting DAS Cofman Wittes and the Consul General, PA ministers and members of Palestinian civil society described the impact of separation on Israeli-Palestinian relations. PA Minister of Education Lamis Alami noted that before the Oslo process began in the early 1990s, there was more interaction between Israelis and Palestinians. Now, younger Palestinians show little interest in forming personal relationships with Israelis, and successive generations lack the depth and breadth of the relationships their parents once enjoyed. Younger Palestinians typically know little of Israel beyond the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel they encounter at checkpoints, she said. Ziad Abu Zayyad, co-editor and co-publisher of the Palestine-Israel Journal, added that a lack of "knowledge of Palestinian suffering" within Israel meant there was little or no pressure on Israelis to make peace, particularly in light of domestic concerns over the Israeli economy. Zayyad argued, "Israel's (2009 Parliamentary) election was about security, Iran, and the economy -- not peace."

BARRIERS TO PEACE

3. (C) Participants agreed that there is little political room for Fayyad or PA President Mahmoud Abbas to move towards negotiations absent a settlement freeze, because popular sentiment will not permit it. "Your problem is not with Abbas, it is with the Palestinian people," said Zayyad. "You must convince the Palestinian people that the U.S. is pushing

the peace process," Zayyad said, claiming that Palestinians had "lost faith in the political process and negotiations." Forcing the Palestinians to negotiate with the current Israeli government under Prime Minister Netanyahu would "kill Abbas" politically, Zayyad claimed.

¶4. (C) Others agreed, with one noting, "We (Israel and Palestine) have lost faith in each other. There are many enemies on both sides." Zayyad decried the growing role of what he described as "Jewish fundamentalism" in Israeli society, referring to reports of insubordination in the IDF inspired by statements of religious leaders against evacuation of West Bank settlements. He warned, "We are heading towards a religious conflict; everything is possible in this environment." While the two-state solution remains "the only good option," he said, it will not remain a viable option forever.

LOSING JERUSALEM, DISENFRANCHISING THE WEST BANK

¶5. (C) Participants drew attention to growing social and economic disparities between Arab-majority East and overwhelming Israeli West Jerusalem. Minister Diab told DAS Wittes that "we are losing Jerusalem to crime, poverty, isolation, and extremism." MEPI-funded student leader Anwaar Jaber noted that her daily commute to Birzeit University -- located only a few miles from her home -- now required "hours" as a result of the separation barrier. This had forced her to relocate to the campus. Note: Only four of the 16 crossing points in and out of Jerusalem are open to Palestinians. End Note. Hazem Kawasmi, chairman of a young

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entrepreneurs' NGO, noted that despite economic improvements, the West Bank was effectively a series of isolated "microeconomies."

¶6. (C) Zayyad and Diab said that discrepancies in law enforcement in the Jerusalem area posed a significant problem. They noted that the absence of overlap between the routes of the Jerusalem municipal boundary and the separation barrier created inconsistent administrative responsibilities. Even in those areas of the West Bank in which the IDF has clear responsibility, Zayyad said, the security of Palestinian residents remains a low priority. Zayyad said, "We are hostages to the settlers -- that is why you have checkpoints. Israel is protecting 200,000 settlers by disenfranchising 2.5 million Palestinians." Note: There are approximately 300,000 settlers in the West Bank according to 2009 statistics. End note.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN PALESTINE

¶7. (C) Minister Alami drew attention to the strides women have made in the Palestinian public sector, noting the presence of three female ministers in the current PA cabinet (holding the education, women's affairs, and social affairs portfolios). She went on to note that the presence of women in other prominent positions in society (including the Palestinian Stock Exchange) placed Palestinian society well ahead of other Arab societies in this regard.

¶8. (U) NEA DAS Cofman Wittes has cleared this message.

RUBINSTEIN